

Remarks to the
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
March 13, 1990

I want to thank the American Library Association for this year's Madison Award. It is indeed an honor.

It is certainly a worthy objective to enhance the public's right to know. A democracy cannot function effectively if the public that ultimately drives the political process is not equipped with information needed to develop informed opinions. This is nowhere more clear than in the environmental area, and especially in the area of air toxics control, where the Toxic Release Inventory established under Section 313 of the 1986 Superfund Amendments has made such an impressive difference.

Before the Superfund law was passed I did my best to evaluate the level of toxic air pollutant released into our skies. In the months after the tragic 1984 chemical accident in Bhopal India, in which 3000 died and many hundreds of thousands sustained serious injuries, my subcommittee asked chemical companies to divulge the level of toxic chemicals being released into the air.

Based on the response of more than 70 chemical companies the subcommittee provided a preliminary estimate that over 80 million pounds of toxic chemicals were released into our skies annually. Nevertheless, industry spokesman quickly condemned the number as exaggerated.

The following year, as the Superfund Law was under consideration on the House floor, Congressman Jerry Sikorski offered an amendment that chemical companies and other air toxic sources should have to report the level of their releases into the atmosphere. EPA would be required to assemble a Toxics Release Inventory. Stridently opposed by industry, this amendment prevailed by a single vote.

The Inventory produced its first data last year, and that information exceeded our worst fears. We learned that our early estimate was low by more than an order of magnitude. As the press has widely reported, we learned that in 1988 industry released some 2.7

billion pounds of air toxics into our skies.

As many had hoped it would, this information laid the foundation for better control of this threat to public health. And in the wake of the public concern following publication of the Inventory, the Administration choose to include an air toxics control program in its clean air proposal.

The proposal is not a perfect one. Far from it. While technology based standards are established, the proposal would eliminate language in current law that requires that toxics air pollutants be controlled to whatever extent is needed to assure that the public health is protected.

But this is a starting point, upon which we can build an effective air toxics control program. And this is one our most important legislative objectives as we attempt to amend and strengthen the Clean Air Act.

I also want to point out that the environmental arena is not the only place where we have had to fight for the public's right to know. There are a number of public health problems that have nearly gone unrevealed as well. The dangers of giving aspirin to children, for one. The health effects of repeated exposure to dioxins, for another. The potential reproductive hazards of video display terminals. These are all areas we have had to fight to give the public information, and had to fight too often with what the Office of Management and Budget defines as, quote "paperwork reduction."

I'd like to say for the record that an efficient government must still be a responsible government, and any Administration that limits the right of the American people to know about potential dangers to their well-being is not living up to that responsibility. I hope we will see no more of the OMBs restrictive and dangerous interpretation of the Paperwork Reduction Act, especially as it relates to vital public health information.

So I thank you again for this honor, and commend you for your clear commitment to expanding the public right to know, a matter of utmost importance to the effective working of our democratic system and the effective protection of the public health.